Justice and Compassion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 October 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0:00] Well, good morning to all of you again. As I said at the beginning, welcome. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here, so on behalf of our church, we're delighted to welcome you here, especially if you're joining us for the first time.

We are always so glad to be together. This is a special Sunday, so if you're here for the first time, you're here on a special week. We've been praying together and working together for some time to rebuild and restore our future church home.
At the beginning of this calendar year, thanks to many years of prayer, God answered those prayers by allowing us to close on a building at 5th and Q Northwest. It's a beautiful historic space. We're very excited about it. This, for us, is a place that we've been looking for for years. We've been living this kind of nomadic life as a church for 17 years, and we have this God-given opportunity to finally put down roots to make good on our commitment to love the city long term, to have a place where we can worship God, where we can grow in our faith, where we can do ministry to the wider DMV area, not just for years to come, but God willing for generations to come.
So we're very excited about that. And so we're taking time this Sunday to celebrate, just to reflect and give thanks on all that God has done over the last 17 years, all that we hope God will do for generations to come.
[1:19] There's going to be a big meal after the service in the Fellowship Hall across the street. If you're here, you're invited. We'd love for you to come and join us. And a little bit later in the service, we're going to be getting, you've already actually received in the bulletins, commitment cards.

For those of you who are a part of our church, members and regular attenders, you call Advent home. This is an opportunity for us to pray and ask God, as we've been doing, how is God calling me to be a part of this rebuilding, this work of rebuilding?
What does God want to do through me in and for this city? So we're going to be talking a little bit more about that later in the service. But as a part of this campaign, we have been looking together at the book of Nehemiah, which is very appropriate because this is a story about God's people coming together to rebuild their home, to build a place where they can worship God and grow in their faith and do ministry in the wider community.
So we're sort of sitting at the feet of this book and we're learning all we can about where we are in our life together as a community and what we're called to be in the city of Washington, D.C.
Last week, we focused on all of the opposition that God's people face from the outside, all of the challenges, all of the factions and people who do not want them to exist.
[2:37] And we talked about how to persevere in the face of that. This week, we come to chapter five and we see that the biggest threat to this whole endeavor isn't on the outside of the community.

It's actually on the inside of the community. It's within the community itself. You know, we've spent a lot of time over the years. I've spent a lot of time. I know you have too.
Wondering what kind of building does God have for us? Where will it be? What will it be like? But this week, we're going to ask a far more important question, I would suggest.
And that is not what kind of building does God have for us? But what kind of us does God want for this building? All right. Who are we called to be? Not just in this building, not just in the neighborhood of Shaw, but in this city.
Who are we called to be? That's our question this morning. We're going to look at this in two parts. Nehemiah chapter five, first the problem, and then Nehemiah's response.
[3:34] Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we know we don't have to ask for you to be present with us because you are. It's more about our willingness to relax into your presence, to recognize it, to attune ourselves to you.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

Lord, we pray that through your word, you would do what you've always promised to do, that you would speak to us, that you would take this ink and paper and that it would come to life because of your spirit, and that through your written word, Lord, we would actually come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.
It's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, I wanted to describe a bit about the problem that's happening here. We have to understand the context of what's going on at this point in the story.
Essentially, there is a financial crisis. The economy has taken a major downturn, and that results from a couple of factors. Number one, there are supply chain issues leading to widespread food insecurity among a lot of people.
A lot more people have moved to the area, right? The population's going up. Many of the farmers who would normally be working outside of the walls of the city to grow food have come in to either help work and build or to defend, right, from the possible attack that's coming from the outside.
[4:49] So food production can't keep up with the rising population, and people are starving. So that's the first factor. Second factor, overtaxation.

The economy's in the toilet. The government says this is a good time to raise taxes. So they raise the taxes. King Artaxerxes had agreed to give Nehemiah the financial resources necessary to go and rebuild Jerusalem, but he's not necessarily doing it out of the kindness of his own heart, and he intends to get that money back, and he's doing it by taxing them through the nose.
And so taxes go up, and it gets so bad that you have people who can't even afford to eat who are taking out loans just to pay their taxes, right?
So you have overpopulation, you have, or a higher population leads to starvation and famine and food insecurity, and then you have overtaxation. Whenever you have a growing population of people who are poor and therefore vulnerable, lots of bad things can happen.
Now, one would think that since this is a community of God's people, that wouldn't be the case. Surely, you're going to have people step in to help and provide relief and support their brothers and sisters who are in need, but that's not what happens.
[6:08] Instead, this financial crisis lays the groundwork for widespread systemic exploitation of the poor by some of the rich nobles. They're engaging in essentially what we would call predatory lending practices.

They're what the Bible calls usury. They're taking advantage of people who are desperate by lending them money and then by charging them excessively high interest on those loans.
And so the poor are being forced to put up their homes and their fields and even their children as collateral. And they're getting buried in debt that they can't repay. So the wealthy are coming in and seizing their property, and they're taking their children as slaves.
So imagine going to church and seeing your daughter, and she's sitting with another family because that family gave you a loan and you couldn't repay that loan, so they took your daughter as a slave and she lives with them now.
So imagine having to worship sitting in a pew next to that family. So when Nehemiah hears about this, he is furious. We might expect to see this kind of thing happening among other ancient Near Eastern people groups, but God's law expressly forbids these kind of practices.
[7:29] It expressly forbids charging interest when you loan money to one of your fellow Jews. It expressly forbids taking someone as a slave when they can't pay their debts.

It expressly forbids these kinds of things. God actually says, I took you out of slavery from the land in Egypt. You shall not make slaves out of one another, no matter what the circumstances are.
This kind of thing infuriates Nehemiah. We have to ask, why is this happening among God's people? And the diagnosis is essentially this. Because these nobles do not fear the Lord.
There is no fear of the Lord. Nehemiah at one point when he confronts the nobles, he says, why are you doing this? Do you not fear the Lord? Do you not fear the Lord?
He again and again throughout this book says that his desire for justice, this entire endeavor, for Nehemiah is motivated by the fear of the Lord. Now the fear of the Lord is not a dread fear.
[8:32] It's not the same fear that you feel when you see a spider. The fear of the Lord means a profound reverence. In the Bible, when you fear the Lord, it means that the Lord, the holiness of the Lord, the righteousness of the Lord, the heart of the Lord is the most important thing in your life.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

It means that your heart is aligned with God's heart, that you care most about what God cares most about. That's what a fear of the Lord is. The principle is this.
When your heart is right with God, you are then compelled to put right all of your human relationships. The horizontal, right, when that relationship is right, when you fear the Lord as you should, then you are compelled to put right all human relationships around you.
And the theologian John Murray in his work Principles of Conduct says that the fear of God is the foundation for a just society. Because when people fear the Lord, that flows out into their relationships with other people.
Their relationships are marked by the things that God cares about. Respect, integrity, justice, compassion, mercy. Wherever, Murray says, there is a lack of the fear of God, wherever people do not fear the Lord, you see moral decay.
[9:58] You see injustice. You see exploitation. You see a devaluing of human life. You see people doing what these nobles are doing. Nehemiah says, do you not fear the Lord?

God's entire purpose for his people is to be holy. It's to be set apart. God's heart to put his heart on display. So that when people see the way God's people live, they say, that's what God cares about. That's the kind of God they worship. To show the world that God, the God of the Bible, is the kind of God who desires justice and righteousness. Right?
To flow out into the world. The rest of the world may be a place where the strong trample the weak, but God's people are called to be different. God's people are called to be people who use their power, when they have it, to lift up the weak.
To lift up and care for the vulnerable and the oppressed. So God desires that wherever his people go, justice and peace and freedom would follow. That's how you know God's people are theirs.
[11:00] Because wherever they are, you find justice and peace and freedom and people are flourishing and they're being lifted up and set free. So when we ask this question like we did at the beginning, what kind of us does God want for this building or this neighborhood or this city?

Who are we called to be? Part of the answer is this. Part of the answer is that we are called to be people who care about and pursue biblical justice. In the community where God has called us and placed us.
And we see a beautiful example of biblical justice in Nehemiah's response to the nobles. So that was the problem. Let's look at his response. There are essentially three levels at which biblical justice is enacted.
People who are poor or vulnerable or oppressed, they need multiple layers of support and aid. So there are sort of three levels if you want to read more about this. Tim Keller's Generous Justice is a great book that describes this in a lot more detail.
But we see all three here at work in Nehemiah. The first level at which biblical justice is pursued is the level of relief. Simply providing relief.
[12:11] Relief is direct aid. It meets immediate physical, material, economic needs. So when Nehemiah hears about the injustice, he takes immediate action. He halts construction.

He calls an assembly and he says, all of this stops today. Right? He's immediately calling a halt to the things that are causing suffering.
So relief ministry in the church focuses on meeting immediate needs. Providing food. Providing temporary shelter. Providing clothes. Providing free or low-cost medical services.
Legal aid. Foster care. Counseling services. Right? For those of you who are involved in some of the relief work that is done in this city or want to get involved.
Right? We currently have a ministry to refugees. We participate in a foster care support ministry called DC 127. You may not know we're in the early stages of forming a mercy ministry team that will be in place when we move into the building.
[13:07] Because there's a lot of immediate needs in the neighborhood where we're going to be moving. And we want to be equipped and ready and prepared to be able to meet some of those needs. To the best of our ability.

Right? This is relief work. And it's essential, especially where there are people who are actively suffering. The second layer of biblical justice work that is every bit as important is the work of development.
And some of you actually do this professionally. You work in various kinds of development, either here or abroad. Development goes beyond meeting immediate needs. And it focuses on giving

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

individuals or families or entire communities what they need to move beyond dependency on relief. So that they can become more financially self-sufficient. So in Nehemiah chapter 5 verses 10 and 11, we see that Nehemiah demands that the nobles and officials return the fields.
Return the vineyards that you've claimed. Return the olive groves. Return the houses that you've seized from the poor. And he also orders them to repay the interest. That they had exacted from them.
[14:15] So he's going beyond the immediate felt needs. He's saying we need to create the conditions necessary for these people to regain their livelihoods. To regain their property.

To have long-term financial stability. And that's only going to happen if we have some major changes. Right? They need property. They need a means of building and holding on to wealth.
The Bible has a lot to say about development. Right? We could do a whole series on the Old Testament teaching around development. The Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright. You know, we quote Tom Wright a lot.
The New Testament scholar. So you can think of it as O.T. Wright and N.T. Wright. But O.T. Wright, his name's Christopher, says this. He says, God's law asks us to find means of ensuring that the weakest and poorest in the community are enabled to have access to the opportunities they need. In order to provide for themselves. Opportunities may include financial resources but could also include access to education, legal assistance, job opportunities. Right? That's the work of development.
[15:20] Extremely important. We have an opportunity actually coming up next Sunday on November 3rd, 5 p.m. on November 3rd, to learn from someone who's been doing development work in D.C. longer than many of us in this room have been alive.

His name's Jim Dickerson. He's a pastor based in the Shaw neighborhood. But he has been intimately involved in working on affordable housing, neighborhood revitalization, ending generational poverty, and homelessness all throughout Washington, D.C.
He's been doing this for over 45 years. And he's agreed to meet with us to make himself available. And so we're going to go. So I want the whole church to come just to sit at the feet of a man and to learn from a man who's been doing this work for decades.
There's so much to learn from someone like that. It's a great opportunity to learn, so I hope you'll all come. November 3rd, 5 p.m. I'll see you there. Maybe we can go out and grab dinner after. We can talk about what we've learned. That's the work of development.
Number three, there's the work of relief, the work of development. The third level at which this work needs to happen is the work of reform. Talk about social reform. Reform moves beyond the immediate relief of individual needs.
[16:35] It moves beyond even development efforts. And it actually seeks to change the conditions and social structures that lead to injustice. Right? You may remember the famous quote from Desmond Tutu.

There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in. That's what reform seeks to do. Nehemiah pushed for systemic reform.
But in doing so, he shows us that one of the reasons why systemic reform is so hard. Nehemiah is calling for a total change where this kind of practice doesn't happen anymore.
But here, it's easy to miss. Fascinating. As a part of calling for reform in the area of loaning and charging interest among God's people, he says this in verse 10.
Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.
[17:33] In other words, Nehemiah has to admit that he's a part of the system. Right? He's saying, he's moving. It's so easy to be a slacktivist online calling other people out for all the things they need to do differently.

It's much harder to say, you know what, I'm part of this. I'm actually contributing to part of what's wrong with the world. And I realize that I've been doing this. My brothers have been doing this. My servants have been doing this.
We've all been participating in this broken system, and it's exploiting people. And we all need to stop, including me. That's much harder to do. The thing is, we can't bring about systemic reform without recognizing that we're part of the system.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

Without recognizing that if the system's broken, it's partly because I'm broken. And then taking responsibility for the part we play in it. You know, as we move into the Shaw neighborhood, we have been and will continue to have to be conscious of the fact that we are moving into a historically black church in a historically black neighborhood.
This is a church that was originally built by newly freed enslaved people. It was a church started by people when they were still slaves. Right?
[18:50] And it's been continuously held by the same church up until now. The original deed, when I saw it at the closing, was handwritten in cursive. You don't see that very often, by the way.

Praise God, the way this deal happened, we were able to work with a church that was actually excited to hand this to a church that will continue to do gospel ministry.
We developed a deep relationship and friendship with Deacon Curtis, Pastor Harris, and some of the other leaders there. At the closing, we were all able to actually pray together. We prayed for one another, and we prayed for our churches.
They're excited to see this go into the hands of a gospel-centered church. They're very excited. They were excited to move into their new space. As we've stayed in touch, I hear nothing but great reports. They're loving where they are.
So praise God, I think this deal went better than any of us could have hoped or prayed for. And yet, nevertheless, when it comes to issues around race, gentrification in a city like Washington, D.C., we have to recognize what we represent and how it reflects larger trends in D.C.
[19:54] And our approach to biblical justice has to always take that into account. Right? We have to use the language of us and we when we're talking about these issues, not them. We're a part of it.

So justice happens at multiple levels, right? It happens at the level of relief. It happens at the level of development. It happens at the level of reform. The church is called to be a part of justice at all of these levels.
We're called to do this kind of work at every level. And some of you do this kind of work at every level. Right? I know that you do. You care about this kind of thing. But there's something else that we see in Nehemiah that goes way beyond anything we've seen so far.
This is not officially a part of justice work because up until now, what we're talking about is something anybody can do. And a lot of times to do the work of development or to do the work of reform, it requires partnerships between faith-based groups and churches and government institutions and other institutions.
It requires a lot of collaboration across multiple sectors to get some of that bigger picture work done. The fourth thing is something that we see that goes beyond all of this.
[21:04] It's really what sets this incident apart and what shows us the heart of the issue. We see extravagant generosity. Nehemiah doesn't just address or correct the injustice.

He goes above and beyond. He goes above and beyond. And actually sets an example for everyone through his extravagant generosity. He refuses to take a food allowance like his predecessors did because he says this is exceedingly burdensome for people.
We're not going to do this. Instead, he says, I want you to come and feast with me. He's not just not taking a food allowance. He says, come to my house for dinner. I will host you.
He hosts 150 people, feeds them as much food and wine as they can handle, and he does it all at his own expense, out of his own pocket.
Right? We see this extravagant, generous hospitality where he welcomes people around his table, hosts them, feeds them, cares for them. And we get a sense from the way he writes it that they're not just eating, you know, oatmeal.
[22:16] They're not just eating scraps. This is a feast. He says every 10th day we bring out the wine and it would be a big celebration. I just want you to take a minute and imagine what would the world be like, what would the world be like if everybody had this kind of extravagant generosity?

Right? At the center of how they approach their lives. Right? What would the world be like if everyone had a heart like this? Well, I can tell you right now, there would be no more injustice. Injustice would be wiped out.
And so it raises this question for us. How do we get a heart like this? How do we become the kind of people who go beyond just fixing what's broken and we actually begin to enter into a new way of being human together?

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

Where the defining feature of our life together is extravagant generosity. Where we're going above and beyond to love and to serve and to bless and to show hospitality and to welcome people in and to care for them and to make sure they're loved and that their needs are met.
How do we get a heart like this? How do we get a heart like this? How do we get a heart like this? How do we get a heart like this? How do we get a heart like this? Be more like Nehemiah. Try harder. If you've tried to do that, you know it's easier said than done.
[23:36] The first step is this. It's to actually realize the truth about ourselves that spiritually speaking, as Jesus said, spiritually speaking, we are all dead.

We are desperately poor. He said, blessed are those who are poor in spirit. Blessed are those who recognize we are spiritually destitute.
When I say all I got to do is try harder and I'll be like this, I'll be like Nehemiah, I'm thinking like I think I'm spiritually rich. Like I've got most of what I need, I just need to get a little better. And Jesus says, no, the thing you need to realize is you're spiritually destitute.
In the world's eyes, we may have a successful job. We may have a nice house. We may have a big retirement account. But spiritually, we are buried under a mountain of debt. And it is debt that we can't ever pay off.
And it's not debt as a result of somebody victimizing us. It's debt that we earned. Because of our sin. Because of our rebellion against God.
[24:40] And our only hope we have to realize lies in the one, not in Nehemiah, but in the one to whom Nehemiah points. Right? Because this story is a part of a much bigger, larger story.

It doesn't end with Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a shadow. He's a prefiguring. He's a figure of the greater Nehemiah who is to come. Right? Nehemiah was a rich man who used his wealth to bless and to serve those who were poor.
And he invited them to come and to feast at his table at his own expense. But this story points to someone far greater. Jesus Christ owns everything that exists.
It's all his. In terms of wealth, no one compares. And yet when Jesus looks at us and he sees our spiritual poverty, he sees that we are hopelessly lost, his heart is broken for us.
And so we see in the gospel that Jesus is willing to give up everything for us. He's willing to become human. He's willing to become homeless. He's willing to become destitute.
[25:47] He's willing to take on our debt as his own. Here's how the apostle Paul phrases it. He says, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by you, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

That's how he phrases the gospel in a nutshell. And in the context there, he's talking about the Macedonian Christians who are just like Nehemiah. They see a need.
It's a famine. And they go above and beyond. They can't even afford to pay their own bills. But they go above and beyond. And they give money that they can't afford to give to relieve famine in another part of the world.
And Paul's saying, do you want to understand where that kind of generosity comes from? Here's where it comes from. It's because they've experienced the generosity of Jesus Christ. For you know that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.
That had sunk into their hearts so that you by his poverty might become rich. They're like, in Christ we are so rich, we are so blessed. How can we not give? They recognize this.
[26:58] There are many religions that say God cares about the poor. Only Christianity says that God became poor for us.

So the more we understand the extravagant generosity of God toward us, the more generous we become. It's the heart's natural response. Generosity begets generosity.
Generosity. So every week, friends, we have an opportunity to experience the generosity of Jesus. Just like Nehemiah, we are invited to feast at Jesus' table.
Where here he doesn't just feed us at his own expense, he offers us himself. His body, his blood to remind us how much he loves us.
Right? Christian generosity isn't just about giving your stuff away. It's about giving yourself away to the God who gave himself away for us.
[28:00] Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for Nehemiah and the example that he gives us of justice. Lord, we thank you most for the one to whom he points, for Jesus Christ.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48

Jesus Christ who, desiring to put the world right, desiring to eradicate injustice, went above and beyond. Did the unimaginable.
Did the unthinkable. Lord, gave everything up for us to lift us up. Lord, may we be people who are marked by that love and generosity. May we be people who live that out in our life together.
Lord, may that be a defining feature of our ministry in this city as we seek to be what you've called us to be. May this be for your glory. We pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-10-14 23:03:48